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A PERSONAL PHILOSOPHY CONCERNING TORRES STRAIT ISLAND COMMUNITY EDUCATION

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Bamaga stands on the tip of Cape York and adjacent to a number of Torres Strait Islands. Both Bamaga and the Islands are included in the one administrative region.

Parents of students on the Torres Strait Island communities are still confused as to what schools or education are providing for their children. Parents have been desperately hoping that education would improve their ways of living as they were led to believe. As it now stands, more and more parents are becoming disillusioned after receiving evidence of the inadequacy of the Western education system for their culture and beliefs.

Unfortunately, the school is being blamed by parents for many of the problems that they perceive in their children - such as neglect of traditional values. The situation highlights the inadequacy of an education system in a continuously changing community that relies almost entirely upon 'juvenile' schooling. It probably points up the need for a family education service that prepares all members of the Island community to survive both in their own community and in the larger Australian community.

In this paper I will be discussing the present feeling in the communities about the educational services imposed on the Torres Strait Islands and Bamaga.

Having established the present situation, I will outline guidelines for programs that may help development within the community. As a teacher I will be attacking the problems from an educational and philosophical point of view. I will be outlining the relative roles and responsibilities concerning the total community development concept.

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I have chosen the Torres Strait Island community for my topic as a result of being brought up in the area and having a strong sense of cultural belonging. As a local, being brought up in Bamaga, I attended the primary school through to high school. During this time I witnessed and experienced the dilemmas and frustrations, not only of my peers, but also of non-indigenous persons, namely my teachers, working for a city-based government department tied to a program and structure that appeared inappropriate in a socially culturally different setting to mainstream society. I have had the pleasure of being involved with students of all of the Islands, and have lived among most of them. This has given me insight into the problems they faced; and I was able to see similarities with the problems I faced.

Even though Bamaga is more Westernised in comparison to the Islands, excluding Thursday Island, the Islanders on Bamaga still have a tie with the cultures and beliefs from the Islands. Nevertheless, the same applies to the Islanders who now reside on Thursday Island, which is even more Westernised than Bamaga.

At present most Torres Strait Island Australians do not have the facility to express their needs and feelings or know how to influence non-indigenous Australian responses to meeting those needs. Until such time as they learn to do this, basic problems in education services will continue to exist.

It is my hope to present a pragmatic and constructive approach to the situation by exposing the problems. I will also offer my philosophical views on education, based on community development principles, that may be usefully implemented for the betterment of the Torres Strait Island Australians.

Destructive criticism of the Education Department is pointless but I believe it is necessary to focus on the inability of this and other government departments, comprising transient non-indigenous workers, to discern the problems and work for a solution.

It must be pointed out here that this unique group of Australians has special needs which must be considered; comments, words, methods of communication, situations which teachers of non-Islander background may consider of little consequence may evoke a strong response from Islander students. Distinct differences like these can often lead to misunderstanding and conflict which is one of the greatest problems in Torres Strait schools.

Many teachers tend to believe that teaching students of Islander background is the same as teaching students of Aboriginal background. In fact, this is wrong because Islander Australians have a distinct culture, values and attitudes different from those of Aboriginal Australians. Teachers must not only consider the distinct cultural aspects but also the disadvantages Island schools have in comparison with Aboriginal or mainland schools because of greater isolation and limited access to facilities.

Torres Strait Islanders are watching and waiting for positive things to happen in both education and Community management. Last year, as a result of legislation for the freehold of land and self-management being passed by the Queensland Government, along with the decision of the people, control over education shifted from the Department of Community Services (D.C.S.) to the Queensland Department of Education.

BACKGROUND TO EDUCATION IN THE TORRES STRAIT ISLANDS

For the reader to understand the complexity of the situation that exists with both continuing and emerging problems, I should give a brief account of the diverse backgrounds of the people, of black/white relationships and of the people's organizations. Language differences cause ineffective communication and thus worsen the problems that already exist. These will be considered in their relationship to development and the influence on the behaviour of the Torres Strait Island people.

The 1870s saw three major events which had both positive and negative effects on the lives of the people who have occupied and still occupy the Torres Strait Islands. The first was the introduction of Christianity in 1871 - which is referred to as "The Coming of the Light". Christianity spread rapidly throughout the Islands. Pacific Islanders were originally used to teach it and later, trained Torres Strait Islanders took over. Secondly came the introduction of the Queensland Education Act in 1875, which was followed by the third event: the Annexation Act for the Islands. By the Act the Queensland Government in 1879 proclaimed the Torres Strait Islands part of Queensland.

Since the turn of the century, a Queensland Government Department, not Education, has been responsible for providing educational facilities on Torres Strait Island Reserves. First known as the Department of Native Affairs (D.N.A.), it later changed to the Department of Aboriginal and Islander Advancement (D.A.I.A.) and recently (1984) changed again to the Department of Community Services (D.C.S.).

As a result of various policy changes that parents have had very little involvement in, they are still confused and often do not know what their children are learning. They cannot help them, feel inadequate, and are losing authority over their families. As a result the young people lose respect for their elders, a basic cultural characteristic of Islander people.

Furthermore, Communities such as Bamaga and Thursday Island, where the majority of Islander students attend State High Schools, in most instances end up with having teachers (European) who only stay a year or two at the most, fly home for holidays, very rarely mix on an equal basis with the families, and do not involve themselves conscientiously in Community affairs, or even develop an understanding of the cultural differences between the Islanders and other students.

There is a need for reconstruction in the Communities. The Community should be more involved in reconstructing or reorganizing the management of their Community. They should be given the opportunity to become involved in developing their own style of educational programs.

Reconstruction should be based on confronting the changes which the Communities are witnessing. Students leaving school will need to absorb the impact of technology. The communities are already making use of some of the new technology but most of them still find it difficult to change and only use those parts of it which make life easier for them. In short, they look at the technological resources as substitutes for hunting, cooking and so on, and in doing so often do not notice how they are gradually losing their traditional values.

The Philosophy of Reconstructionism must take place in order to restore the cultural values in Torres Strait education. Brameld puts forward the idea that education should seek a balance between old and new cultures:

Education must commit itself here and now to the creation of a new social order that will fulfil the basic values of our culture and at the same time harmonize with the underlying social and economic forces of the modern world.

(Brameld, 1971, p.62)

Teachers from a culturally different background teaching in a Torres Strait Island Community must take into consideration not only the change of social and economic forces of the modern world,

but also distinct differences within local culture. By this, the teacher must consider the different values and methods of communication. An effort should be made to teach not only standard Australian English, but a language that is commonly spoken by the locals - such as Pidgin.

The Torres Strait Islands are divided into two language groups - Miriam, which is the traditional language of the Eastern Islands and Mabuiag of the Central and Western Islands (refer to map) with each Island having a slightly different dialect from the other within the same group. For example, people from Boigu, Sabai and Dauan can understand the language of Maguiag and Badu, but these two islands have their own distinct dialects.

Teachers must consider these differences and the uniqueness of their speakers, who also have distinctive cultural practices.

MEANINGFUL EDUCATION

Education in the Communities was first brought in by the Church, where education was included as an integral part of religion. The main religions which instituted education in these Communities were the Anglican and Presbyterian religions.

In missionary times there used to be a belief in a mystical goodness surrounding the mission teachers who made personal sacrifices to travel to remote areas to serve their underprivileged brethren. Now, the expected dedication, sincerity and Christian values have changed, and so have the local people in response.

Today, because many people have lost faith in the Church, the local communities resent the attitude of paternalism. It is the young especially who have rejected the Church and this causes divisions within the family unit. In addition to this, facilities and programs for education of the Communities are very poor and inappropriate. Young people appear to have broad knowledge of subject matter and academic knowledge that enables them to survive more effectively in the Western society, while their unschooled parents find it difficult relating to them. So the normal generation gap is exacerbated by a cultural gap as well.

Education in the Torres Strait should be re-assessed to explore the meaning and results of what it is doing to the students. Education has been seen as a process which places most of its emphasis on Western values. Students were, and still are, taught many things that are irrelevant to what they want to do. As a result,

many of them leave school only to become unemployed; some work as labourers for the government, and other small businesses, and many look to TAFE to fulfil their educational needs. That is not to say, however, that these are entirely wrong things to do.

What education should be doing, though, is taking a more pragmatic view, and schooling in the Torres Strait should place more emphasis on the people's cultural values. Pragmatists such as Pierce and Dewey believe that

...the teacher should construct learning solutions around particular problems whose solution will lead his pupils to a better understanding of their social and physical environment.

(Pierce and Dewey, 1971, p.25.)

Education in the Straits should be based on the needs of the people. It should be versatile in order to cater for a wide range of needs.

Education should cater for the needs of Islanders who choose to study and maintain their cultural heritage. It should also cater for those who prefer to leave their island and further their studies or live in a more Westernised environment such as the city. Furthermore, education should cater for those who want to continue their studies, then later return. In this case, Torres Strait Island culture should be taught in the State education curriculum where it is most appropriate. The reason for this is to make other Australians of white backgrounds (especially teachers) become aware of the distinct culture of this unique group of Australians.

At the moment, most European teachers who are posted to the Torres Strait schools lack knowledge in the culture and attitudes of the Islanders.

The Department of Education should require teachers of non-indigenous background to be specially trained for Torres Strait Island service. There is an obvious need to develop effective teaching strategies and curricula that are appropriate to the learning styles of Island children. I support Carl Rogers, who believes in providing students with -

...an opportunity to explore and come to grips with their sense of identity, including their self concepts and value systems.

(Rogers, 1977, pp.132-133)

I can certainly relate this to my years of schooling at Bamaga where there was no motivation to learn because what I was learning was inappropriate to my needs and had no relevance to the way I was brought up. As a result, I gradually lost my cultural identity, and this happens with many other students until later on in life it becomes obvious and difficult to relate to our respected elders and parents effectively. As a result, many students are forced into living a stereotyped life. This is not entirely wrong. Students, however, should be given the freedom of choice and helped whilst still at school to clarify their purposes.

LANGUAGE AND LITERACY

As mentioned previously, there are distinct differences in two language dialects spoken throughout the Torres Strait Community and the common language spoken is sometimes referred to as Pidgin English, which is a mixture of English and other languages. Children at school are taught to read and write in English but when communicating at home they speak in their mother tongue. They believe this is an important part of their cultural identity. In some communities, however, the usage of traditional language is gradually dying out as a result of monolingual education based on the English that is taught from primary school level. The people of each community should be given the choice to have either a monolingual school or a multilingual school where languages from the other islands may be introduced.

Ultimately it should be the decision of the Community, with advice from people in similar emerging areas, to choose an official language for all operational functions both within and outside the Community. This decision should be supported by a united effort to upgrade literacy, where no effort should be made to be monolingual but a need for efficient communication and learning should be seen. Associated with this should be the availability of resources to allow for the development of written school books and resources in the languages mentioned.

SUGGESTED APPROACH TO T.S.I. EDUCATION

It has become obvious to educational philosophers, teachers and employers that learning is related to survival in the learning environment. This applies to the tribal situation, the modern technological system and all the different stages of development between. Hence, learning services need to be restructured in order to cater for the needs of the people in the Community. Preparation for *all* of the people to survive in a rapidly changing environment needs to be based first at the Community level and then developed to those situations beyond.

Obviously the successful transition from the present system to the needed system will take time and considerable advice from people trained and experienced in the field of education. Island teachers are being trained, currently, at the Cairns College of TAFE in order to return to their Island and teach.

Ultimately, the decisions regarding structure, content and operation of learning services must be made by Islanders acting in the best interests of other Islanders. I would put forward the following ideas as a basis for discussion and future action:

1. Having established a committee or board to implement the desires of the Community regarding education and co-ordinate services, it would be advisable to draw up a flexible, developing, "Statement of Principles". One must keep in mind that -
 - a) learning can only take place in the individual
 - b) the school is a community and operates as such
 - c) the school is part of the wider Community.
2. Encourage all people to share, both voluntarily and in a paid capacity, the responsibility for educating themselves and others. Recognise expertise in the Community, use it and build on it.
3. Employ skilled teachers who will become part of the Community. While employing non-indigenous tradespersons for the general Community work, expect that they will have a desire and an ability to teach their trade, both formally and informally, while living and working in the Community.
4. School leavers who wish to further their studies should be encouraged and supported by the Community and given the freedom of choice.
5. Develop teaching programs for people within the Community. In a family education system people may well be learners and teachers (facilitators) at the same time. The opportunity to teach to others what they are learning, both reinforces their own learning and provides an education service to the Community, thus decreasing the number of 'outside' teachers to be employed.

6. Programs of learning, although broad in some respects, should be related to computer technology with the use of AUSSAT. Thus, programs be related to local occupational needs and opportunities both personal and regarding employment.
7. Traditional learning methods should be recalled and wherever possible and practicable employed within the structure of the learning services, making use of the skills of parents and other elders.
8. The members of the Community need to feel that they are a part of controlling and an influence on what they and their children are learning. Favourable attitudes to learning related to both personal and Community need and desire should be developed.

Education, development, and survival are intrinsically linked. At all times the Community must, with dignity, maintain control of all services within its bounds and foster their related growth. There will always be a need for reconstruction, reassessing and the continuous carrying out of feasibility studies.

ACADEMIC COURSES

Naturally parents are anxious that their children do not leave home, because they realize life will change them, and this is where the problem starts. Furthermore, the level of English literacy of these senior students disadvantages them in their quest for tertiary studies. Standard Australian English is not spoken in their homes.

Instead of students leaving home to do academic training, maybe tertiary institutions such as TAFE can take courses closer to them. As a suggestion:

- a) A TAFE college could easily be set up on Thursday Island and one on Bamaga to provide a variety of services for the Islands and nearby Communities.
- b) Development of an academic course that is related to the local environment and culture such that students may have more relevant academic learning experience within their Community. This growth of a pertinent and recognised local course, which would depend on Community support and participation, would certainly have an upgrading effect. With

this approach certain units or requirements for tertiary courses may also be developed locally.

CONCLUSION

It must be remembered, in summary, that the ideas suggested are not offered as solutions in themselves. The solutions will come from the Community choosing the ideas that they wish to implement and test themselves.

Education has become a 'God' imposed upon indigenous Communities for their benefit, by the controlling authorities. Very often it is a painful experience that is inappropriate to the local environment, and of limited benefit for their human survival. Ultimately it would be up to the student to make up his/her mind as to what they want to do, as this quote by Neill would support:

The function of a child is to live his own life - not the life that his anxious parents think he should live, nor a life according to the purpose of the educator who thinks he knows what is best.

(Neill, 1968, p.27)

Education must be directly related to human need and must be of content, form and purpose that is relevant to the local indigenous Community. The seeds of hope, freedom and personal human survival must be returned to all indigenous Australians.

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* A NATIONAL FIRST

John Lester, former Vice-president of the Aboriginal Education Council, is the first Aboriginal person in Australia to be appointed the principal of a TAFE college. John's appointment to the Griffith TAFE college is a wonderful achievement.

John has had wide experience in the field of education. He has taught in both primary and secondary schools in New South Wales, and has held senior positions in the Departments of Education and Technical and Further Education, and was a member of the National Aboriginal Education Committee.

John sees this appointment as an important step for all Aboriginal people in an important process that recognises the value of what Aboriginal people have to offer the wider community.

* From *Duran-Duran*, August 1986.

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